

Fact to Fiction

The Truth behind Movies Based on True Stories

Annette Lamb

Many movie dramas begin with a statement that they are a true story, based on a true story, or inspired by a true story. These catchphrases can be confusing for both children and adults.

Film dramas and biographies such as **Schindler's List** (R, 8.9, 1993) are often used in classrooms to help mature teens visualize real-world people and events, so it's essential that both students and their teachers are media literate and able to distinguish fact from fiction. **Schindler's List** is an example of a film that has been praised for its educational merits and historical authenticity. However, it's a docudrama, not a documentary.

In documentary filmmaking, the goal is to present an unbiased examination of the facts. However, those who label films as "based on a true story" aren't tied to the facts. In many cases, people, places, and events may be altered for dramatic effect. It may not be possible to know exactly what people said in private, so a dramatic film may fill in the gaps with invented dialogue.

It's useful for youth to think of these movie dramas on a spectrum. The website **Information Is Beautiful** <<https://informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/based-on-a-true-true-story/>> published an infographic detailing the scene-by-scene breakdown of Hollywood films based on true stories. Users can even examine the data used for building the



Based on a True, True Story.

visualization. Involving teens in this type of analysis asks them to dive into the facts behind each scene in a movie drama.

TRUTH ON FILM

Data, facts, and information may all be part of telling a story. However, truth is drawn from our own perspectives of authenticity. Someone who is a protester from one perspective may be a terrorist in the eyes of another. A fact to one person can be seen as an embellishment by someone else.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks (2010) by Rebecca Skloot is a popular work of nonfiction in high schools across America. In 2017, a made-for-television film was released. However, not all of the Lacks family members were excited by the film adaptation. They didn't feel that the movie accurately represented the family members.

The website **History vs Hollywood** <<http://www.historyvshollywood.com/>> explores the connection between films and their roots in reality. Use this website to jumpstart conversations and inquiries into the facts that laid the foundation for a movie. Youth will enjoy reading the articles and examining the "reel face vs the real face" of the actors.

In elementary school, we clearly differentiate between the fiction and nonfiction sections of the library. However, when dealing with movies, these distinctions are often more difficult to identify. This is particularly true of movies based on true stories.

Fly away Home (PG, 1996, 6.8) tells the story of an inventive way to help a gaggle of geese make their way south for the winter. Although based on the true story of Bill Lishman's experience leading a flight of geese with his ultralight aircraft, the film featured fictionalized characters. So although the science and the historical event are accurate, much of the plot of the movie isn't.

The term *docudrama* refers to a film that adheres closely to known historical facts. Where possible, the dialogue includes the actual words spoken as recorded in primary source documents such as court proceedings.

Many space science movies, such as **First Man** (PG-13,



First Man

7.4, 2018), based on the book by James R. Hansen, are docudramas. Another example is **Apollo 13** (PG, 7.6, 1995), based on the book **Lost Moon: The Perilous Voyage of Apollo 13** by Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger. Historical footage and actual audio recordings contribute to the authenticity of these films.

Let's explore ways that teacher librarians can assist students and teachers in making good choices about viewing films based on true stories.

VIEWERS' ADVISORY

Young people are accustomed to asking librarians for assistance in selecting good books. However, youth are also interested in multimedia experiences. Expanding readers' advisory to include viewers' advisory services provides the opportunity to connect with new users and expand exposure to both leisure themes and class-related topics.

Challenge Expectations. Seek out films that challenge student thinking. For instance, many teens enjoy reading true-crime stories. Most students are familiar with the story of Bonnie and Clyde. However, they may not have heard about the many law enforcement officers who pursued them. Encourage mature teens to watch **The Highwaymen** (R, 2019, 7.0). This film tells the story of two Texas Rangers who came out of retirement to catch the outlaws Bonnie and Clyde. Rated R for violence, this film will get teens thinking about outlaws and cultural fame. Viewers will flock to the library to find out more about this violent time in American history.

Bring Biographies to Life. Many students don't read a biography unless it's required class reading or part of

the "Who Was" biography series from Penguin Random House. Use film as a way to jumpstart an exploration of biographies.

The award-winning film **Bohemian Rhapsody** (PG-13, 2018, 8.1) has been popular with all ages. Use this film to introduce teens to the wide range of fascinating biographies in the library, from rock stars to sports figures.

Engage Reluctant Readers. Many movies have their roots in current events. **The 33** (PG-13, 6.9, 2015) is based on a mine collapse, **Deepwater Horizon** (PG-13, 7.1, 2016) is based on a drilling rig explosion, and **The Cave** (2019) is based on a recent cave disaster. Students will be fascinated by these true stories and might seek online articles connected with these tragedies. These informal reading experiences are an effective way to engage students who may not choose to read whole books. They may also set the stage for reading both fiction and nonfiction books connected with other disasters.

Focus on Adventure. Many teens enjoy reading true stories about outdoor adventures. These types of books make interesting book-movie comparisons. Although both **Into the Wild** (R, 8.1, 2007) and **Wild** (R, 7.1, 2014) are designed for mature audiences, they're good examples of how works of nonfiction can be transformed into engaging films. Use these movies to engage readers with the wide range of adventure memoirs in the library.

Explore Multiple Perspectives. Use a combination of books and movies to provide teens with a rich examination of a controversial or complex topic.

The problem of wildfires has been in the news the past several years. Nu-

merous books and movies examine the topic from various points of view. For instance, **A Fire Story** (2019) by Brian Fies is a graphic memoir focused on the 2017 wildfires that burned throughout Northern California. Use this firsthand account to immerse readers in the painful reality of surviving a disaster.

The film **Only the Brave** (PG-13, 2017, 7.7) explores the issue of wildfires from a different perspective. Based on the true story of the Granite Mountain Hotshots, the movie takes the point of view of an elite firefighter group dealing with a raging wildfire. The movie is based on a *GQ* article titled "No Exit," but a number of books have been written about the event, too.



A Fire Story and Only the Brave

Bridge Fiction and Nonfiction. Use movies based on true stories to generate interest in reading fiction. Sports is an area where this connection works well. Below are a few examples:

Battle of the Sexes (PG-13, 6.7, 2017)

The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game (PG-13, 7.7, 2009)

Eddie the Eagle (PG-13, 7.4, 2016)

McFarland USA (PG, 7.4, 2015)

Moneyball (PG-13, 7.6, 2017)

Remember the Titans (PG, 7.8, 2000)

Seabiscuit: An American Legend (PG-13, 7.3, 2003)

Secretariat (PG, 7.2, 2010)

We Are Marshall (PG, 7.1, 2006)

Connect with Older Films. Young people often overlook films that are more than a few years old. Seek out inspirational stories and engaging characters that will appeal to students. **October Sky** (PG, 7.8, 1999) is an example. Based on the true story of a teen who wins a scholarship and joins NASA during the *Sputnik* era, this movie has the same impact two decades after its release. And it might generate interest in learning more about science.



October Sky

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Viewing films can be a powerful learning experience for youth. However, it can also take considerable classroom time. Before suggesting the use of film as part of an in-class experience, consider the following guidelines.

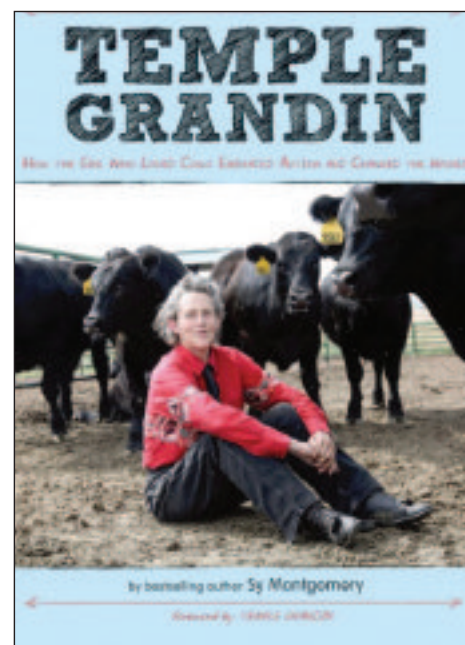
Prepare an Experience. Some people see film viewing as a “lazy teacher” activity. For decades, educators have shown films on Friday afternoons or at the end of the semester. Effective film use takes planning. Build a rich learning experience that connects reading, viewing, and an interdisciplinary approach. Expand the focus to include community- or family-viewing activities.

Temple Grandin (TV-PG, 2010, 8.3) is a film that can be enjoyed at many levels. A book about this fascinating person titled **Temple Grandin: How the Girl Who Loved Cows Embraced Autism and Changed the World** by Sy Montgomery is used in many communities as a “One Book, One Community” selection. Numerous lesson plans can be found online to extend the reading and viewing experience.

Connect to Standards. Build learning experiences that connect with specific standards. For instance, the Common Core (2019) ELA standards ask youth to engage with adaptations by analyzing important elements.

In grade 7, students are asked to “compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium (e.g., lighting, sound, color, or camera focus and angles in a film).”

In grade 8, students must “analyze

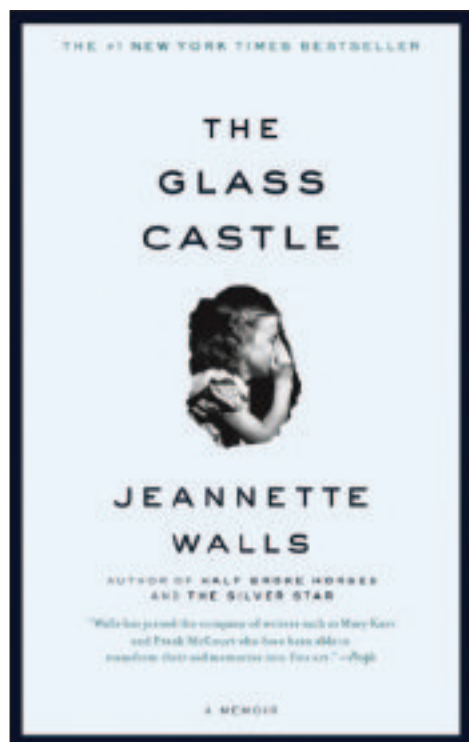


Temple Grandin HBO movie and book

the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.”

Involve students in conversations about how the film writers and producers developed the narrative and plot based on factual information. Discuss how and why a particular mood was created. How were the lives of real people woven into the story line?

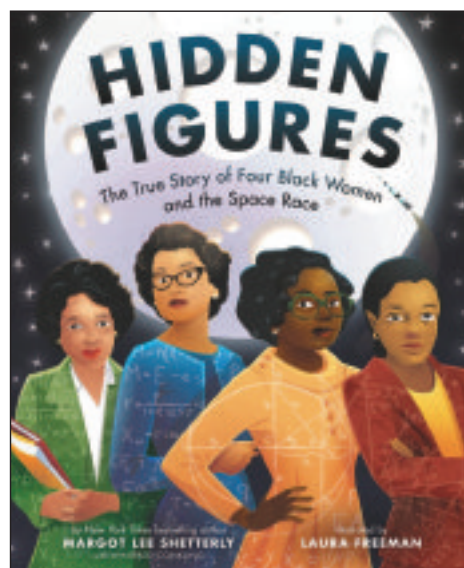
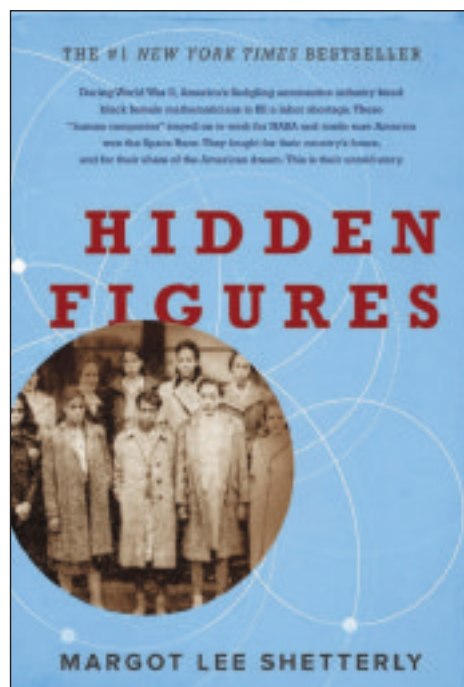
The feature film based on **The Glass Castle**: **A Memoir** (2006) by Jeannette Walls (PG-13, 7.2, 2017) is popular in high school classrooms. The vivid descriptions and complex characters make it an interesting book and film for this type of analysis.



The Glass Castle book and movie

Establish the Context. Films jump right into the action. Unfortunately, young viewers may not have the experiences to understand what's happening. It's important to introduce the ideas, events, and decisions that set the stage for the viewing experience.

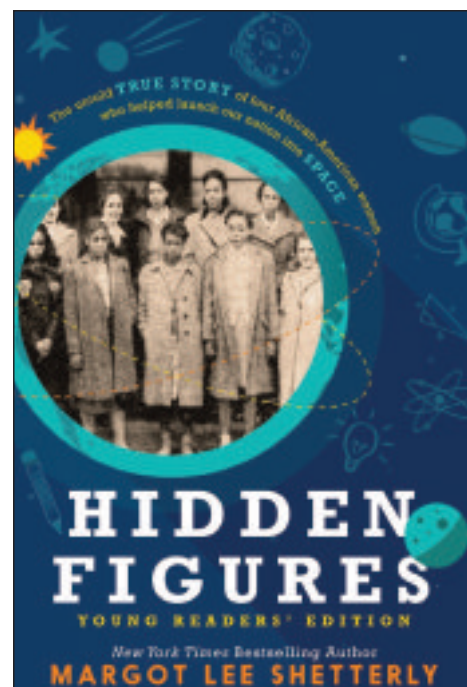
The film **Dunkirk** (PG-13, 7.9, 2017) effectively depicts a specific historical event of World War II. However, it's important to set up the experience for students who need to understand



Hidden Figures book and movie

how the event fits into the overall war. Use primary source documents, historical film footage, photographs, and maps as background information.

Discuss the Fine Line. When viewing a docudrama, many youth will assume that everything is fact. However, omissions, character consolidations, and condensed timelines are common in film adaptations. Talk with students about the "fine line" between fact and fiction in movies based on true stories.



Specifically discuss how screenwriters and filmmakers make small changes in people, places, and events to move the story forward, create excitement, or elicit emotion. From privacy issues to lack of information, there are many reasons why some dialogue is invented for a film.

The movie **Hidden Figures** (PG, 2016, 7.8) focuses on how a key character solved a mathematics problem. In real life, this challenge took many months to solve. However, the movie collapses the timeline and consolidates characters for cinematic impact. Share the adult book, young reader's edition, and picture book with students. Discuss how both authors and screenwriters must choose what to include and omit.

Consider the Timing. Many outstanding films are lengthy. Rather than showing an entire film at once, consider building in learning activities before, during, and after viewing. In other words, watch a section and stop to explore the time period, perspectives, and people involved in the story. Think about the pacing of the film and identify stopping points that don't distract from the film viewing experience. Or consider showing segments from the film that feature key concepts.

For instance, **Gettysburg** (PG, 7.7, 1993) is the film adaptation of the popular historical novel **The Killer Angels** (1974) by Michael Shaara. At 4 hours and 31 minutes, it's a very long movie. Consider focusing on a particular aspect of the battle rather than showing the entire film.

Think about whether a film clip might be as effective as showing the entire work. This is particularly true in cases where films have mature themes. Below are a few other films with historical themes.

Argo (R, 7.7, 2012)

Empire of the Sun (PG, 7.8, 1987)

The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition (G, 7.9, 2000)

Flags of Our Fathers (R, 7.1, 2006)

The King's Speech (R, 2010, 8)

Lincoln (PG-13, 7.4, 2012)

Victoria & Abdul (PG-13, 6.8, 2017)

The Zookeeper's Wife (PG-13, 7.0, 2017)

Determine Appropriateness. From profanity and violence to nudity, many docudramas and biopics have been assigned an R rating. Check the school district's guidelines for showing these types of films. Be prepared to write a letter to parents with an opt-out option available.

Schindler's List (R, 8.9, 1993) and **The Pianist** (R, 8.5, 2002) are two examples of outstanding movies with mature themes that are often used in high school classrooms.

Also, consider the developmental appropriateness of the film for students. Just because the curriculum dictates examination of a topic doesn't mean that a particular film exploring that topic is a good match for youth. Many films are created for adult audiences and contain situations inappropriate for children and young adults.

Plan for Emotional Challenges. Films can elicit a wide range of overwhelming emotions, including frustration, disbelief, anger, and sadness.

For example, slavery can be a tough topic to teach. **12 Years a Slave** (R, 2013, 8.1) is based on an 1853 memoir by former slave Solomon Northup and accurately represents slavery in the 19th century.

Before showing a film such as **12 Years a Slave**, be sure that students

are adequately prepared. They need to know that it's okay to be upset. In some cases, consider activities that encourage parents to preview films with their youth.

Bridge Books and Movies. Many films are based on books. Youth are often disappointed when the movie isn't exactly like the book. They may feel cheated when characters are consolidated and entire chapters are missing. It may help to discuss the reasons for the changes. Also, consider pairing quality books with quality movies.

Thank You for Your Service (R, 6.5, 2017) is a film adaptation of a book by David Finkel. The book and film are a follow-up to the Alex award recipient **The Good Soldiers** (2009). The book chronicles the deployment of soldiers in the 2007 surge in Iraq and their return home. The author is an American journalist who was embedded with the soldiers in Baghdad.

Follow through. Some viewing experiences can have lasting impressions. Students may feel the need to share their frustrations or take action. Be prepared to support these activities with opportunities to follow through in the library. From forming an environmental awareness club to sharing book lists and online resources, be ready for student questions.

Selma (PG-13, 7.5, 2014) features Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1965 campaign to secure equal voting rights through a march from Selma to Montgomery Alabama. History teachers will find the film to be a useful anchor for discussions about the entire Civil Rights Movement. Use this approach as an opportunity to share the spectrum of print materials available in the school library collection. Get students involved in exploring other key his-



torical events and difference aspects of Civil Rights Movement.

CONCLUSION

Movies based on true stories go back to the turn of the 20th century. For instance, the 1912 ten-minute short **Saved From the Titanic** features an actual survivor of the *Titanic*. Over the next century, dozens of books and movies have featured the sinking of the RMS *Titanic*. Although based on the true story, most are fictionalized depictions of the event.

Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_films_based_on_actual_events> maintains a list of films based on actual events.

Many film producers and educational institutions create study guides to supplement the viewing experience. For instance, **The World's Fastest Indian** (PG-13, 7.8, 2005) is a fascinating sports biography. A Google search yields a couple of excellent study guides to accompany the film.

When working with youth, look for true-story movies closely connected to reality. For instance, the book **The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope** (2013) by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer tells the true story of a boy who built a windmill to provide electricity for his community in Malawi. There's also a picture book and young reader's edition of the story.

The Netflix film adaptation of **The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind** (TV-PG, 7.6, 2019) is closely tied to the original memoir. To enjoy the story directly from the source, students can watch the 2007 TED Talk titled **How I Built a Windmill** <<https://bit.ly/2bP3Clc>>, featuring William Kam-

JUNIOR FICTION

MAKING IT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Brown, Monica. **Lola Levine Is Not Mean!** Little, Brown, and Co., 2015. 112p. \$15.00. ISBN: 9780606383288. Grades 1-3. Dolores Levine is strong and very competitive, which tends to get her in trouble with her second grade classmates. She loves soccer and plays goalie. She is also a writer. She writes letters and in her diary. She has very definite ideas about things, like her name. "Dolores" is Spanish for "pain," so she prefers her nickname, Lola. She likes Spanish, though, and practices it, so when she goes to visit her tia [aunt] Lola in Peru, she can show her how much she has learned. When she slide tackles a classmate and injures him, she gets a new nickname, Mean Lola Levine. She doesn't like that, either, and is pleased when her best friend, Josh Blot, the principal's son, stands up for her.

MacLachlan, Patricia. **Just Dance.** Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2017. 116p. \$15.99. ISBN:9781481472524. Grades 3-5. Ten-year-old Sylvie does not understand why her mother, an internationally famed opera singer, gave up her career when she met and fell in love; how can she be content to live on their Wyoming farm and sing to the animals? Sylvie thinks their lives are pretty boring - she wants adventure. Are Sylvie and her brother holding their mom back from her destiny? How can Mom be happy only singing to the animals and her family? Then, when her mom's former duet partner comes to the area to sing, Sylvie fears her mom will leave and go back to the stage. Meanwhile, Sylvie is given a writing assignment for the summer and learns to write haiku and write about her feelings, which helps her express her fears and work out her thoughts. Contains many examples of haiku and other poems by Sylvie. This novel could be a good lead-off to a poetry unit.

Medina, Meg. **Merci Suarez Changes Gears.** Candlewick Press, 2018. 355p. \$16.99. ISBN:9780763690496. Grades 4-7. Merci Suarez, a sixth-grade scholarship student at Seaward Pines Academy, lives with her large Cuban family in a group of little houses. At school this year, she has to be a new student's sunshine buddy—to introduce him to the school—and also has to do extra community service, to make up for her tuition. She already has a lot on her mind, though – Lolo, her beloved grandfather and closest family member, has begun acting strangely, forgetting people's names, falling off his bike, and losing his temper for no apparent reason. Merci knows something is wrong, but no one will tell her what is going on with him. Then, she finds out he has Alzheimer's disease and that it will get worse. What is she going to do without Lolo? Contains a back-of-book note from the author about her relationship with her own grandparents and simple information about Alzheimer's disease, as well as Spanish words and phrases that are sprinkled throughout the book. 2019 Newbery medal winner.

Korman, Gordon. **The Unteachables.** Harper-Collins, 2019. 279p. \$16.99. ISBN: 9780062563880. Grades 3-7. What happens when the worst class in the middle school, Room 117 (kids with anger management issues, kids who can't read, kids who terrify the other kids) is paired up with a burned-out teacher who was unfairly blamed for a long-ago cheating scandal, causing him to lose interest in being a good teacher? The administration is trying to drive Mr. Kermit into early retirement and is sure that putting him with the class everyone thinks is unteachable will do it. But in the end, the kids inspire Mr. Kermit to care about teaching again, and he inspires the kids to actually learn.

Korman, Gordon. **WhatsHisFace.** Scholastic Press, 2018. 231p. \$16.99. ISBN: 9781338200164. Grades 3-7. After his Army family moved for the third time in a year, Cooper Vega and his sister Veronica were given state-of-the-art phones in consolation, so they can stay in touch with old friends. Cooper's phone doesn't seem to work as well as his sister's, and he soon finds out that it's haunted by Roderick, the ghost of a young boy from Shakespeare's time, who died of the plague and who claims to be the real author of *Romeo and Juliet*. He starts appearing to Cooper at inopportune moments, getting him in trouble, but he also helps Cooper succeed in his role as understudy to Romeo, opposite the girl of Cooper's dreams, Jolie. Discusses bullying, crushes, and popularity, and contains references to Shakespearean plays and many lines from *Romeo and Juliet*.

TELL US WHAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO READ

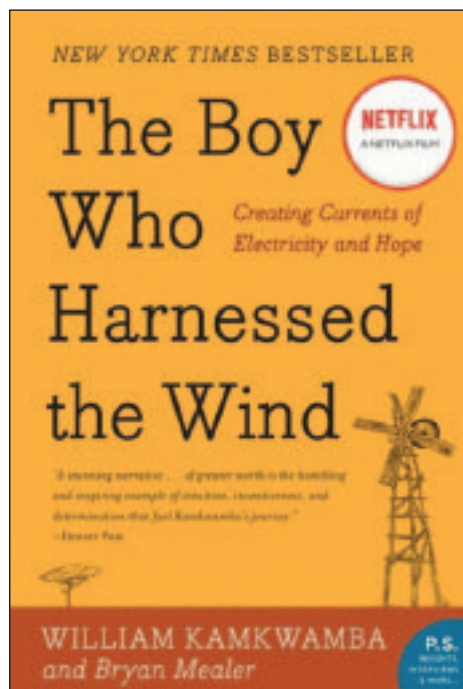


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Tell us what topics you would like to read about, and we will seek to publish articles on those topics. Other comments and suggestions are welcomed, too.



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The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind books and documentary

kwamba, or watch the full-length feature documentary titled **Williams the Windmill** (7.0, 2013).

REFERENCE

Common Core. (2019). *English language arts standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>

